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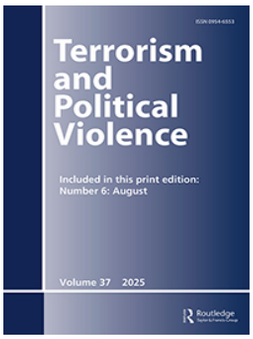

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Linking Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Anti-Government Extremism: Mitigating the Threat with Procedurally Just Governance

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories, political polarisation and anti-government sentiment have proliferated in recent years. Similarly, trust in institutions is eroding, and forms of conspiracy-fuelled violence are now more widespread. While our understanding of how and why people come to believe in conspiracy theories is well developed, the consequences of such beliefs—particularly their link to violent extremism—is less well understood. We know little about *why* conspiracy beliefs might drive violent extremism, and what can be done to mitigate this risk. Using Australian survey data (N = 1595)—a country where anti-government sentiment has increased significantly in recent years—our paper tests whether conspiracy believers are more likely to also endorse and engage in anti-government violence. We measure anti-government violence as (1) support for violent insurrection, (2) violent intentions toward government, and (3) self-reported engagement in anti-government violence. Our findings show a positive association between conspiracy beliefs and violence, with this relationship mediated by anger and perceived government illegitimacy. Findings also show that procedural justice mitigates anger and illegitimacy (i.e. the drivers of violence), and does so for both conspiracy believers and non-believers. Our findings suggest that governments wishing to mitigate the drivers of conspiracy-fuelled violent extremism must commit to procedurally just governance.

KEYWORDS

Conspiracy beliefs; procedural justice; violent anti-government extremism; legitimacy; anger; political violence

Introduction

Recently the world has seen a significant increase in political and opinion-based polarisation.[1] Conspiracy theories are gaining traction, trust in public institutions is eroding, and anti-authority and anti-government extremism is becoming more common.[2] In Australia—where our study is situated—a recent government report highlighted that a growing number of Australians are being radicalised into violent extremism.[3] In his 2024 annual threat assessment, the Director General of Australia's Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) also highlighted that Australia is experiencing a significant increase in anti-government sentiment and political extremism, which is "often inspired by conspiracy theories."[4]

How and why people come to believe in conspiracy theories is understood far more than the consequences of such beliefs—especially their links to violent extremism. We also know far less about how authorities might mitigate the negative consequences of conspiracy beliefs. To investigate these

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questions, our study explores the association between conspiracy beliefs and violent *anti-government extremism* specifically. Anti-government extremism is a subcategory of political extremism, where anti-government extremists primarily or consistently focus on government as a source or cause of perceived grievances and crises, which leads to threatened or actual violence against government targets and/or their representatives.[5] Our study shows that conspiracy beliefs are associated with violent anti-government extremism and that this relationship is mediated by both *anger* and perceptions of *government illegitimacy*.

Given the centrality of justice-based grievances in conspiracy thinking, and the motivation they provide for anti-government actions,[6] we also examine whether *governmental procedural justice* might mitigate the association between conspiracy beliefs, anger and government illegitimacy. We show that it does. Governmental procedural justice entails four key elements. To be considered procedurally just, governments must: (1) enact power in ways that demonstrate respect and dignity for citizens, (2) be transparent and convey trustworthy motives, (3) make neutral decisions, and (4) allow citizens voice before important decisions are made.[7]

Before presenting our study and its findings, we first canvas what we know about conspiracy beliefs, the association between conspiracy beliefs and violence, and where knowledge gaps exist. Next, we discuss why we believe anger and perceived government illegitimacy are critical mediators that explain the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and anti-government violence. Finally, we outline why we think governmental procedural justice might mitigate the negative consequences of believing in conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy beliefs: Are they associated with violence, and what don't we know yet?

Conspiracy theories are explanatory frameworks that seek to interpret and connect seemingly unconnected events and processes. They often implicate powerful malevolent actors working in the shadows to control or harm the public, or conceal important information.[8] They typically focus on accusing governments, multinational companies and global elites of concealing the truth about particular events, or they accuse them of direct involvement in malevolent actions (e.g., putting nanotechnology in vaccines). Conspiracy theories aim to expose perceived corruption and injustices by powerful actors, they feed on grievances, and can urge believers to question, resist, or act out in response.[9]

Conspiracy theories tend to proliferate during uncertain times or after significant events like wars, economic downturns, pandemics, and terrorism.[10] Conspiracy theories thrive in these conditions because they fulfil psychological and emotional needs, particularly when individuals feel powerless.[11] For example, conspiracy theories can help people to make sense of complex events by providing clear and simple explanations, and hence can give people a sense of control or comfort when faced with uncertainty.[12] Conspiracy theories also fulfill needs for social connection. When individuals find a conspiracy community that shares similar beliefs to them, this can provide a sense of belonging and purpose.[13]

But there are wider negative consequences, both for individuals and society, when people believe in conspiracy theories. Empirical studies show that conspiracy beliefs are linked to hatred of minority groups,[14] reduced willingness to vaccinate,[15] increased political disengagement (e.g., voting avoidance),[16] and increased willingness to engage in crime.[17] Bartlett and Miller[18] argue that conspiracy theories act as a "radicalisation multiplier"; they show that conspiracies underpin different forms of ideological extremism. Other scholars specifically point to the links between conspiracy theories and acts of far-right extremism. For example, the perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch massacre was fuelled in part by the 'The Great Replacement' conspiracy theory—based on the idea that western countries are allowing or planning for their countries to be taken over by non-white immigrants and Muslims.[19]

Research exploring the association between conspiracy beliefs and violence is an emerging field of study,[20] with some studies exploring the links between conspiracy beliefs and different types of political and ideologically-motivated violence.[21] In Belton et al.'s.[22] review of literature linking

conspiracy beliefs with violence, it was found that between 2000 and mid-2023, 33 quantitative-based studies contained within 25 publications explored the association between conspiracy beliefs and violence justifying norms, values, intentions or actions. Belton et al.[23] found that these studies examined a range of different types of violent outcomes (general, political and extremist violence), but primarily employed cross-sectional survey data or vignette experiments to analyse the association between conspiracy beliefs and *attitudinal* measures of violence. Only two studies in their review examined actual violent extremist behaviour and these were confined to data from offender profiles in open-source databases. These studies typically reveal that conspiracy beliefs are associated with violent attitudes and behaviours, but only weakly so. Further studies have examined the manifestos of terrorist offenders or explored the ideologies espoused by violent extremist groups,[24] finding frequent references to conspiracy theories.[25] For example, the FBI[26] reported that 46 percent of lone actor terrorists had discussed or consumed conspiracy theories prior to their offending.

While research has examined whether conspiracy beliefs are associated with violence,[27] several knowledge gaps remain. First, few studies statistically link conspiracy beliefs to different measures of extremist violence in one study. Most existing studies focus on attitudinal violence (i.e., general support for violence or violent intentions); studies that compare attitudinal and behavioural violence are uncommon.[28] Second, studies that do link conspiracy beliefs with actual violent behaviour have done so within offender populations known to authorities.[29] General population studies linking conspiracy beliefs to self-reported violent *behaviour* are rare. Third, few studies have explored *why* some conspiracy believers support or engage in violence; that is, they have failed to explore the potential psychological mechanisms that might explain this link. Fourth, factors that may mitigate the negative consequences of conspiracy beliefs (specifically, the drivers of violent extremism) are still unclear. This means we have limited knowledge about how governments, police and other authorities might best respond to extremist threats fuelled by conspiracy theories. Our study addresses these gaps by examining:

(1) the association between conspiracy beliefs and violent anti-government extremism in an Australian general population sample;
(2) both attitudinal and behavioural measures of violent anti-government extremism;
(3) anger and government illegitimacy as possible drivers of violent extremism; that is, as mediating mechanisms that explain *why* conspiracy believers might support or engage in violence; and
(4) whether governmental procedural justice mitigates anger and perceived government illegitimacy effectively in both conspiracy believers and non-believers.

Anger and perceived government illegitimacy as potential mediator variables

While conspiracy beliefs have been linked empirically to violence, what is less well understood are the psychological mechanisms that explain *why* conspiracy believers might support or engage in violence. When it comes to anti-government violence specifically, we argue that *anger* and perceived *government illegitimacy* serve as two distinct but important drivers (i.e., mediator variables) that explain this relationship.

With respect to *anger*, we know that conspiracy theories often highlight perceived injustices through narratives of government deception and betrayal. When individuals believe that authorities are acting unjustly or are intentionally deceiving the public, it can leave people feeling victimised and angry.[30] In fact, the most common response to perceived injustice is anger,[31] which is an important catalyst for violence.[32]

Conspiracy believers often express high levels of anger. Wischerath et al.,[33] for example, analysed the online narratives of different conspiracy theory groups and found anger was a commonly expressed emotion. Scholars argue that when individuals experience intense anger, especially when it is elicited by perceived injustice, they can express support for violence,[34] or be motivated to act violently.[35] For example, Jolley and Paterson[36] surveyed British participants about 5 G COVID-19-

related conspiracy theories and found that individuals who believed that 5 G telecommunication towers transmitted the COVID-19 virus were more likely to say they would burn down 5 G towers, and were more likely to justify similar behaviour by others. They also found that anger mediated these relationships. That is, anger provided an explanatory bridge linking belief in that conspiracy theory to a willingness to support, or engage in, 'violent' behaviour.

Believing authorities lack *legitimacy* is also important for understanding conspiracy theory beliefs and their links to extremist violence. Legitimacy is the belief that authorities have a right to dictate our behaviour, and that we as citizens have an obligation to obey and comply willingly with those authorities and their rules.[37] De-legitimisation is the psychological withdrawal of legitimacy where someone comes to perceives an authority as illegitimate. De-legitimisation is a major consequence of viewing authorities as corrupt or acting unjustly. Procedural justice studies, for example, show that when individuals perceive governments and other authorities as procedurally *un*just, they are more likely to view the authority as illegitimate.[38] This can result from perceptions, justified or not, that authorities are untrustworthy, have made biased decisions, have treated people disrespectfully, or not allowed them voice. Importantly, a perceived lack of these elements has a negative influence on how people view and behave toward an authority or their laws.[39] In other words, a real or perceived lack of procedural justice may contribute not only to negative attitudes towards authorities, but also to a psychological withdrawal of legitimacy and decreased compliance with directives, rules and laws. In fact, a core tenet of *procedural justice theory*[40] is that the experience or perception of procedural injustice can detrimentally affect public perceptions of an authority's legitimacy and can reduce people's willingness to do right by those authorities and their laws (including complying with authority directives or rules/laws).

To understand how de-legitimisation processes might influence violence specifically, Gamson et al.[41] argues that before acting violently people must first reframe their thinking and adopt a de-legitimisation frame. Similarly, Sprinzak[42] suggests that extremists must first go through a process of 'de-legitimation' to perpetrate terrorist acts. Research on radicalisation often finds that extremists reject the legitimacy of authorities and their laws.[43] As noted earlier, conspiracy beliefs are often borne from perceived injustice. Theory suggests, therefore, that in order to support violence or act violently toward a government, conspiracy believers must first come to see the government as illegitimate and worthy of taking action against.

Surprisingly, legitimacy remains an under-researched concept in the conspiracy theory literature. Only a handful of conspiracy theory studies have empirically explored 'legitimacy-related' concepts. They find that conspiracy believers tend to feel more 'dissatisfied with their government,'[44] 'dissatisfied with democracy,'[45] or do not believe that the 'political system sufficiently responds to the demands of its citizens.'[46] Only one *unpublished* study found that illegitimacy (i.e., operationalised as 'dissatisfaction with democracy') mediates the association between conspiracy beliefs and intentions to use political violence.[47] Together, these studies suggest that perceived illegitimacy may be an important consequence of holding conspiracy beliefs, and that illegitimacy might also explain the link between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism.

Procedural justice as a potential mitigation tool

Due to their self-sealing quality, conspiracy beliefs are extremely difficult to shift through counter-argument and appeals to logic.[48] In fact, direct efforts to counteract entrenched conspiracy beliefs can lead conspiracy believers to double down on their beliefs.[49] From the preceding section it was noted that perceived *in*justice (particularly procedural injustice) is associated with public perceptions of an authority's illegitimacy.[50] Research also finds that procedural justice is associated with reduced anger levels.[51] Hence, rather than directly address or attempt to counter conspiracy beliefs themselves, it may prove more useful for authorities to mitigate the 'drivers' of violent extremism; that is, find ways to reduce the anger and perceptions of illegitimacy expressed by many conspiracy believers. We suggest governmental procedural justice may prove valuable. That is, while not shifting the conspiracy beliefs

themselves, if governments adopt a more procedural justice informed approach when engaging with people who hold conspiratorial beliefs, this may help decrease believers' willingness to mobilise to violence by reducing their anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy.

In many conspiracy theories, government is implicated as the major cause of injustice. It is not surprising, then, that conspiracy believers often call for a need for greater government transparency, fairness and democratic principles.[52] Van Prooijen[53] notes that procedural justice grievances in particular are highly prevalent amongst conspiracy believers, and so conspiracy believers *should* be especially sensitive to signs of procedural justice and injustice from authorities. Like legitimacy, procedural justice also remains an under researched concept in the conspiracy theory literature. Only two empirical studies have been published investigating the relevance of procedural justice in the conspiracy theory literature. First, van Prooijen and de Vries[54] found evidence from a workplace study that procedurally just leadership, relative to other leadership styles, reduced conspiracy beliefs amongst workers about their organisation. Second, Murphy[55] found that experiencing procedural justice from police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic mitigated the strength of the association between individuals' conspiracy proneness and their distrust of police, and their uptake of COVID-related conspiracy theories. That is, procedural justice was associated with lower distrust and reduced uptake of specific COVID-related conspiracy theories. This occurred even among those individuals *most* prone to conspiracy thinking. Based on these findings we argue that if conspiracy believers see governments as procedurally just (and consistently adhering to procedural justice principles), this might not mitigate their conspiracy beliefs, but it might mitigate conspiracy believers' anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy, thereby decreasing their support for violence or willingness to mobilise to violence.

Current study

Our study aims to better understand the association between conspiracy beliefs and violent anti-government extremism. We test this association using survey data collected from a general population sample of adult Australians. Of specific interest is whether anger and the perceived illegitimacy of government mediate the conspiracy belief/violence relationship, and importantly, whether governmental procedural justice can mitigate conspiracy believers' anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy. Figure 1 presents our conceptual model. By measuring violent anti-government extremism in three different ways (i.e., as (a) support for violent insurrection—a violent uprising against an authority or government, (b) violent intentions, and (c) self-reported violent behaviour), we can test

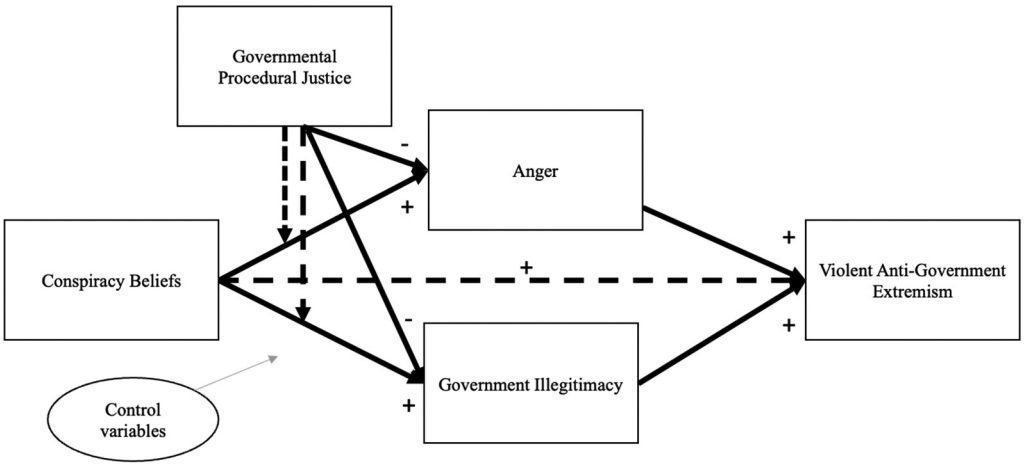

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

whether similar psychological mechanisms occur for different types of violence. We test three hypotheses:

H1: Conspiracy beliefs will be associated with heightened anger, perceptions of government illegitimacy, and violent anti-government extremism.

H2: Anger and perceived government illegitimacy will mediate the association between conspiracy beliefs and violent anti-government extremism.

H3: Governmental procedural justice will be associated with reduced anger and government illegitimacy in both conspiracy believers and non-believers.

Methods

Participants and procedure

In 2024, Australian Facebook users were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey examining attitudes about the government. Participants were recruited using Facebook's AdManager function, which enables targeted advertisement of a research project based on demographic criteria. Facebook users who were interested in participating and who met our eligibility criteria (i.e., were aged 18+ and whose Facebook location profile reflected they resided in 'Australia') were directed to an external weblink embedded within the advertisement to access additional details about the study and the survey on LimeSurvey. Note, we placed no restrictions on whether the individual was a citizen or non-citizen, nor how long they had resided in Australia.

Facebook was utilised for recruitment for several reasons. It is the dominant social media platform used in Australia, with almost 60 percent of Australia's population being active Facebook users.[56] Facebook is also widely recognised as a conduit for spreading conspiracy theories.[57] It also attracts an older demographic who typically have lower levels of digital literacy and as a group show greater vulnerability to misinformation.[58] Recruiting Facebook users thus provided a cost-effective way to reach a sufficient number of conspiracy believers, overcoming limitations of nationally representative surveys that often under-represent such individuals.[59] All participants were given the option to enter a prize draw to win one of ten $100 gift vouchers. The survey received ethics approval from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GUHREC: 2024/248).

Participants were aged 18 to 90 years (M = 51.44, SD = 13.72), with 58.40 percent identifying as male, and most (84 percent) being born in Australia. Additionally, 88.78 percent identified as White/Caucasian, 60.69 percent were married, and 22.52 percent held a bachelor's degree. Regarding political affiliation, 25.64 percent of respondents reported being left-leaning, 30.04 percent were centrist and 44.31 percent were right-leaning in orientation.

Measures

This paper forms part of a larger funded project on conspiracy-fueled extremism. As such, the survey contained a wide variety of topics measured by more than 200 survey items. Specifically, it measured concepts related to anti-government sentiment (e.g., distrust of government; perceived government effectiveness), conspiracy beliefs, psychological disposition (e.g., trait reactance, social dominance orientation), emotion (e.g., anger), criminogenic factors (e.g., criminal history; family background) and political behaviours. For detailed information about the survey methodology, sample characteristics and full survey instrument see Murphy et al.[60]

To test our specific conceptual model (see Figure 1), only those items pertaining to conspiracy beliefs, violent anti-government extremism, anger, and perceptions of government procedural justice

and illegitimacy were relied on for this paper. The Appendix provides exact wording of all survey items used in this paper and Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each measure presented below. Two factor analyses were performed separately to examine the discriminant validity of items in the multi-item scales for the independent/mediator/moderator variables and the dependent variables (i.e., the violence measures). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy revealed strong results for each test (KMO =.95, p <.001; and KMO =.85, p <.001, respectively). All items in each scale loaded as expected onto their respective factor. These results are available from the authors on request.

Independent variables: Conspiracy beliefs and governmental procedural justice

The degree to which participants held *conspiracy beliefs* was measured using eight items. These focused specifically on anti-government-related conspiracy theories (e.g., 'There is a "deep state" embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight'). Items were adapted from Uscinski and Parent[61] and were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), where higher scores indicate stronger belief in these specific conspiracy theories (α =.94).

Governmental procedural justice was measured using six items designed to assess the perceived fair conduct and decision-making of the Australian government (e.g., 'The government treats people with dignity and respect'). This scale was adapted from Murphy et al.'s[62] work, and each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree); higher scores indicate the government is perceived as more procedurally just (α =.91).

Mediator variables: Anger and government illegitimacy

Anger and government illegitimacy served as the two mediator variables. *Anger* was measured with one item capturing the amount of anger respondents felt when thinking about the Australian government ('When you think about the government, how much do you feel the following emotion? ….Anger'). This item was adapted from Murphy and Tyler[63] and was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = I do not feel this at all to 5 = I always feel this); higher scores indicate heightened anger.

Six items assessed respondents' perceptions of *government illegitimacy* (e.g., 'I do not recognise the legitimacy of our government'). The items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), captured participants' willingness to cede authority to the government and were adapted from Murphy et al.[64] Higher scores indicate that respondents viewed the government as more illegitimate (α =.86).

Dependent variables: Violent anti-government extremism

Violent anti-government extremism was measured with three distinct scales: support for violent insurrection, violent intentions toward government, and self-reported violent behaviour toward government targets.

Support for violent insurrection was measured with two items (e.g., 'It may be necessary at some point soon for citizens to take up arms against the government'). It was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores suggesting greater support for violent insurrection (α =.80). Items were taken and adapted from the 2023 American Values Survey.[65]

Violent intentions was measured with four items adapted from Doosje et al.[66] (e.g., 'I would use violence to defend a cause that is important to me'). This was also measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater intentions to engage in anti-government violence (α =.89).

Violent behaviour was measured via self-report. This scale contained five items (e.g., 'Have you ever done the following actions in service of a cause? … ….thrown objects at police?') measured on a 1 = never, 2 = once, 3 = several times, 4 = often, 5 = very often scale (α =.57). Higher scores indicate that

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, frequencies and bi-variate correlations between all measures

Variable	Mean (SD)	%	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Conspiracy belief	3.42 (1.08)	–	1												
2. Anger	3.41 (1.09)	–	.46***	1											
3. Govt illegitimacy	3.39 (.90)	–	.61***	.52***	1										
4. Procedural justice	1.69 (.80)	–	−.55***	−.51***	−.59***	1									
5. Support for violence	2.52 (1.20)	–	.61***	.41***	.54***	−.41***	1								
6. Violent intentions	2.46 (1.05)	–	.27***	.28***	.34***	−.20***	.61***	1							
7. Violent behaviour	1.11 (.27)	–	.12***	.12***	.13***	−.01	.21***	.30***	1						
8. Gender (*ref*: female)	–	41.6	.03	−.05	.06*	−.03	.18***	.28***	.10***	1					
9. Age	51.44 (13.72)	–	.13***	−.11***	−.05*	−.03	−.02	−.19***	−.05*	−.04	1				
10. Education	6.15 (1.75)	–	−.25***	−.11***	−.20***	.16***	−.19***	−.09***	−.02	−.11***	−.04	1			
11. Household Income	5.79 (3.77)	–	−.11***	−.01	−.03	.02	−.03	.01	−.07**	.11***	−.19***	.23***	1		
12. Political leaning	4.24 (1.60)	–	.42***	.19***	.30***	−.32***	.41***	.04	−.06*	.18***	.13***	−.15***	.09***	1	
13. Extremist associates (*ref*: no)	–	99.2	−.03	.00	.01	.02	.01	.05*	.12***	.02	−.05	−.01	−.05*	−.04	1

participants had engaged more often in violence against government targets or their representatives. The scale was adapted from Schils and Pauwels.[67]

Control variables

Various control variables associated with extremism were also measured and included in our study. This included *age, gender* (0 = female; 1 = male), *educational attainment* (1 = did not have any or much formal schooling to 9 = postgraduate degree (Masters or Doctorate)), *household income* (1 = $0-20,000 to 16 = $300,000+), having *extremist acquaintances* (0 = No; 1 = Yes), and *political leaning*. Political leaning was measured with one item: 'Some people talk about "left" (e.g., Australian Labour Party, Greens), "right" (e.g., Liberal National Party, One Nation), and "centre" to describe political parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself in terms of your support for political parties?.' The item was measured on a 1 = very left-wing to 7 = very right-wing scale. A higher score on the political leaning measure indicated the respondent was more right-leaning.

Analysis plan

We first examined descriptive statistics for all measures (see Table 1 and Figures 2–5). To test our three hypotheses, we conducted three parallel 'mediation' analyses (specifying Model 4) and two 'moderation' analyses (specifying Model 1) using the PROCESS macro in SPSS v.27.[68] By specifying Model 4 in PROCESS we could test the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and each of the three types of anti-government violence we measured, while exploring whether anger and government illegitimacy mediated these relationships (see Table 2). Specifying Model 1 in PROCESS allowed us to assess whether procedural justice was associated with reduced anger and perceived illegitimacy, and importantly, whether this occurred similarly for both conspiracy believers and non-believers (see Table 3). Control variables were included in all models as covariates.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows that support for violent insurrection, violent intentions, and self-reported violent behaviour are low in this sample. Conspiracy beliefs, in contrast, are somewhat high on average, as are levels of anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy. Survey respondents also generally perceive the Australian government as procedurally *un*just.

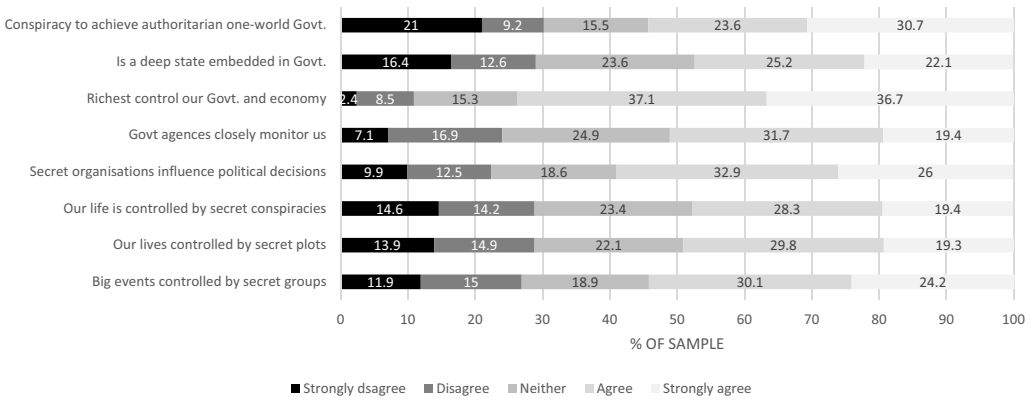

Figure 2. Proportion of participants adhering to conspiracy beliefs.

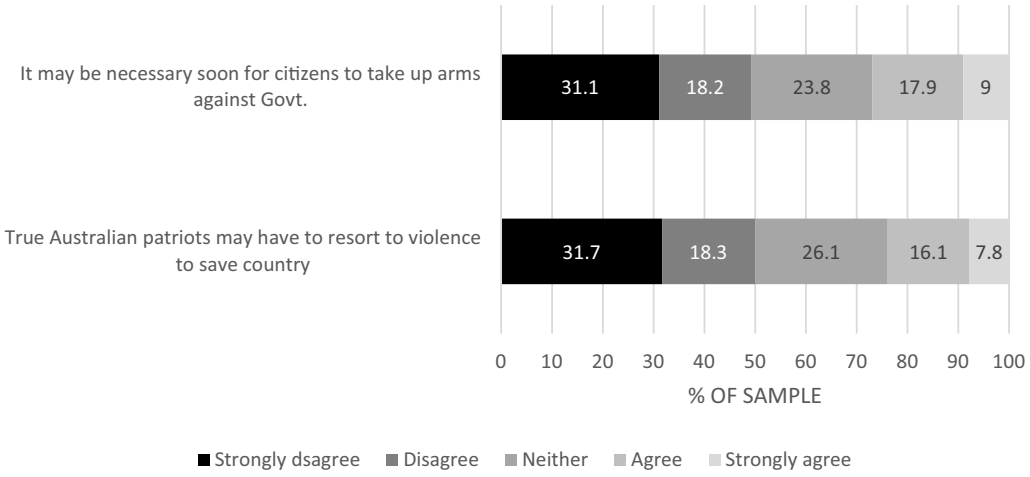

Figure 3. Proportion of participants who support violent insurrection.

The correlations in Table 1 show that stronger conspiracy beliefs are positively associated with anger and government illegitimacy, but negatively associated with procedural justice. Conspiracy beliefs are also strongly associated with support for violent insurrection, but are moderately and weakly associated with violent intentions and self-reported violent behaviour, respectively. Anger and government illegitimacy are positively correlated with all three types of violence, but the relationship is weakest for violent behaviour. Finally, participants who perceive the government as more procedurally just are less likely to express anger or perceive the government as illegitimate; they are also less likely to support anti-government violence or indicate an intention to be violent toward government. Procedural justice perceptions are unrelated to self-reported engagement in violent behaviour.

Like Table 1, Figures 2–5 show that despite there being a high level of endorsement of conspiracy theories, support for violence, intentions to commit violence, and actual self-reported violent behaviour are very low. For example, Figure 2 shows a substantial proportion of participants endorse conspiracy theories (e.g., 47.3 percent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'There is a "deep state" embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight'). Yet Figures 3–5 show that a low proportion of participants express strong support for violent insurrection, have violent intentions toward the government, or indicate they had engaged in actual anti-government violence, respectively.

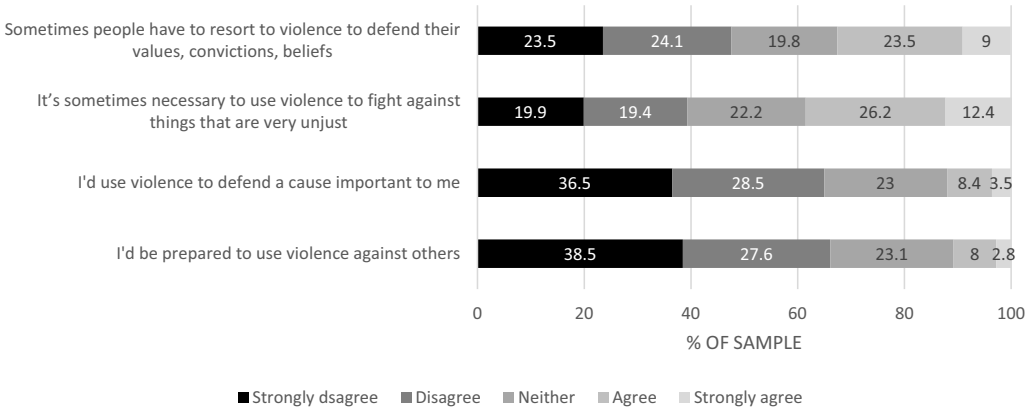

Figure 4. Proportion of participants who express anti-government violent intentions.

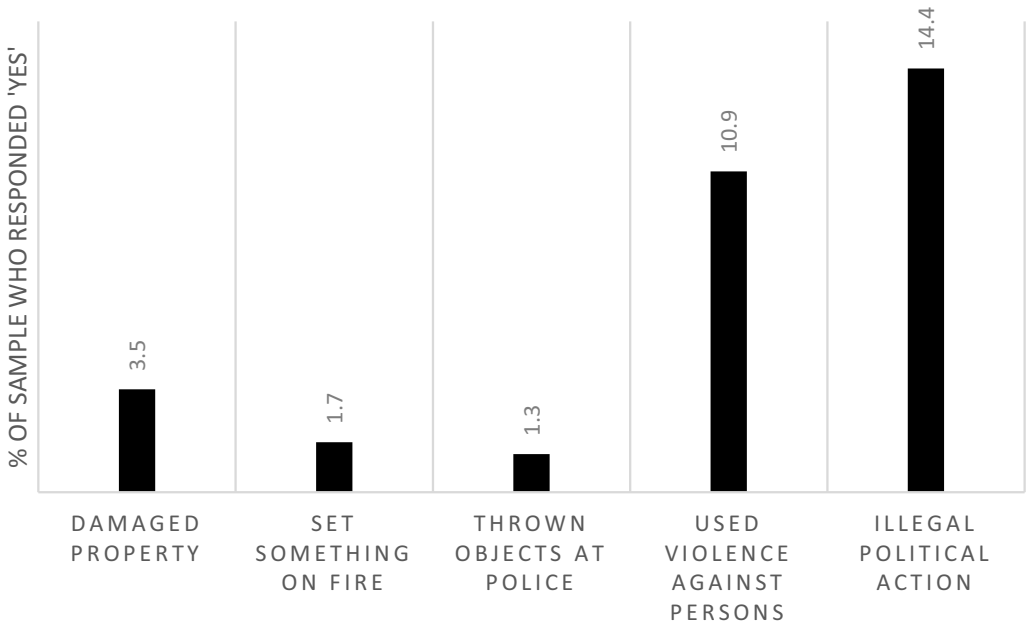

Figure 5. Proportion of participants who self-report engaging in violent anti-government extremism.

Does anger and illegitimacy mediate the relationship between conspiracy belief and violent anti-government extremism?

Table 2 presents results for three parallel mediation models and includes the indirect effects of conspiracy beliefs on the three types of violence via anger or illegitimacy. Model 1 presents findings for participants' support for violent insurrection, Model 2 presents findings for violent intentions, and Model 3 shows findings for self-reported violent behaviour. The findings are similar across the three models.

With respect to demographics, gender is consistently and positively associated with all three violence measures, with men being more likely to support violent insurrection, have violent intentions, or behave violently. Older participants are less like to support violent insurrection or have violent intentions, but age has no association with self-reported violent behaviour. Political leaning is positively associated with support for violent insurrection but negatively associated with violent intentions and violent behaviour. That is, when compared to left-leaning participants, right-leaning participants are more likely to support violent insurrection against government, but are significantly less likely to express intentions to commit anti-government violence or had engaged in actual violence. Finally, educational attainment, income level and having an extremist associate plays little role in support for violent insurrection or violent intentions. However, lower income earners and those who report having an extremist associate are more likely to have engaged in actual violence.

Most importantly, we find that conspiracy beliefs are positively associated with violence (i.e., support, intentions and behaviour). This relationship is strongest for supporting violent insurrection. That is, those who hold stronger conspiracy beliefs are more supportive of violent insurrection (β =.38, p <.001), are more likely to say they have violent intentions (β =.16, p <.001), and are more likely to say they had engaged in violent anti-government behaviours (β =.14, p <.001). Both anger and government illegitimacy are positively associated with all three forms of violence (see Table 2). However, of these two mediators, government illegitimacy seems to have the strongest association with these three measures of violence.

Table 2. Predicting violent anti-government extremism (PROCESS model 4 specification)

	1.Support for violent insurrection					2.Violent intentions					3.Violent behaviour				
Predictors	β	b	SE	LLCI	ULCI	β	b	SE	LLCI	ULCI	β	b	SE	LLCI	ULCI
(Constant)	–	−.71	.23	−1.16	−.27	–	1.10	.24	.63	1.56	–	.78	.07	.64	.91
Conspiracy belief	.38***	.42	.03	.36	.48	.16***	.16	.03	.10	.22	.14***	.04	.01	.02	.05
Anger	.11***	.12	.04	.07	.17	.14***	.14	.03	.08	.19	.09**	.02	.01	.01	.04
Govt. Illegitimacy	.21***	.28	.04	.21	.35	.22***	.25	.04	.18	.32	.11**	.03	.01	.01	.06
Procedural justice	.03	.04	.04	−.03	.11	.05	.07	.04	−.01	.14	.15***	.05	.01	.03	.07
Gender (*ref*: female)	.13***	.31	.05	.21	.40	.28***	.60	.05	.51	.70	.12***	.07	.01	.04	.10
Age	−.05**	−.00	.00	−.01	−.00	−.15***	−.01	.00	−.02	−.01	−.04	−.00	.00	−.00	.00
Education attainment	−.01	−.00	.01	−.03	.02	.01	.01	.01	−.02	.03	.04	.01	.00	−.00	.01
Household income	−.02	−.01	.01	−.02	.01	−.01	−.00	.01	−.02	.01	−.07**	−.01	.00	−.01	−.00
Political leaning	.16***	.12	.02	.09	.15	−.13***	−.09	.02	−.12	−.06	−.12***	−.02	.00	−.03	−.01
Extremist associates (*ref*: no)	.02	.29	.26	−.21	.79	.03	.42	.27	−.10	.94	.11***	.34	.08	.19	.49
			R^2 =.47					R^2 =.25					R^2 =.08		
			F(10, 1554) = 135.71***					F(10, 1554) = 51.70***					F(10, 1554) = 13.83***		
Standardised Indirect Effects of Conspiracy beliefs on Violence															
Via Anger	.03	.04	.01	.02	.05	.04	.04	.01	.02	.06	.03	.01	.01	.01	.05
Via Govt. illegitimacy	.09#	.10	.01	.06	.11	.09#	.09	.01	.06	.12	.05	.01	.01	.02	.08

" >*p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001; LLCI = 95 percent lower level confidence interval; 95 percent ULCI = upper level confidence interval; # strength of indirect effects are significantly different from each other. Confidence intervals for indirect effects are generated over 5000 bootstrap samples.

Table 3. Predicting anger and government illegitimacy (PROCESS model 1 specification)

	1.Anger					2.Government illegitimacy				
Predictors	β	b	SE	LLCI	ULCI	β	b	SE	LLCI	ULCI
(Constant)	–	4.18***	.14	3.90	4.45	–	3.76***	.10	3.55	3.96
Conspiracy belief (CB)	–	.30***	.03	.25	.36	–	.35***	.02	.31	.39
Procedural justice (PJ)	–	−.44***	.04	−.51	−.37	–	−.40***	.03	−.46	−.35
Gender (*ref*: female)	–	−.16***	.05	−.25	−.07	–	.04	.03	−.02	.11
Age	–	−.01***	.00	−.02	−.01	–	−.01***	.00	−.01	−.01
Education attainment	–	.00	.01	−.02	.03	–	−.02*	.01	−.04	−.00
Household income	–	.00	.01	−.01	.02	–	.00	.00	−.01	.01
Political leaning	–	−.01	.02	−.04	.02	–	.01	.01	−.01	.04
Extremist associates (*ref*: no)	–	.24	.26	−.27	.75	–	.33	.19	−.01	.70
CB x PJ	–	.07**	.02	.02	.12	–	−.05**	.02	−.09	−.02
			R^2 =.34					R^2 =.48		
			F(9, 1555) = 89.49***					F(9, 1556) = 160.28***		

" >*p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001; LLCI = 95 percent lower level confidence interval; ULCI = 95 percent upper level confidence interval.

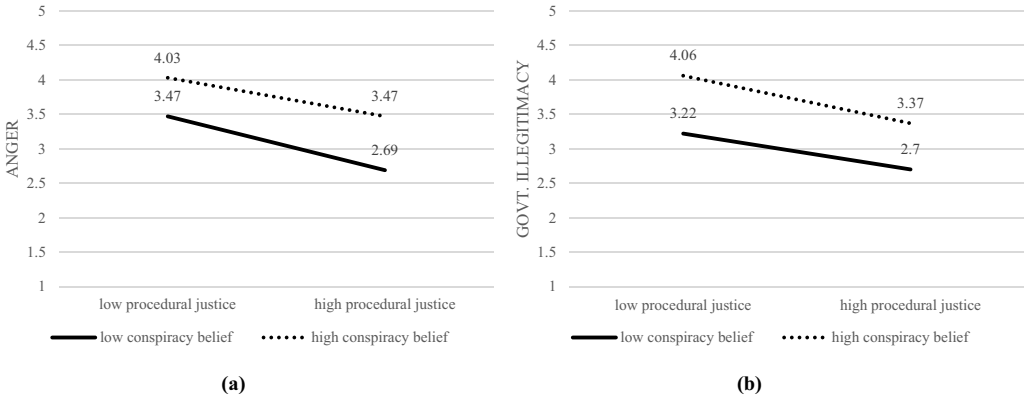

Figure 6. The relationship between procedural justice and: (a) anger toward government; or (b) perceived government illegitimacy, as a function of low and high conspiracy beliefs.

Turning to the indirect effects (which test for the presence of mediation), Table 2 shows that the positive association between conspiracy beliefs and *all* three forms of violence is partially mediated by both anger and government illegitimacy. For example, conspiracy beliefs are indirectly associated with *support for violent insurrection* via the mediating influence of anger (β =.03 [LLCI =.02; ULCI =.05]), and via the mediating influence of government illegitimacy (β =.09 [LLCI =.06; ULCI =.11]). Of the two mediators, however, government illegitimacy has the stronger mediating influence in this relationship. The findings are replicated for the other two forms of violence (intentions and behaviour).

Does procedural justice mitigate anger and government illegitimacy?

Table 3 presents the results pertaining to procedural justice on anger (Model 1) and government illegitimacy (Model 2). Demographic control variables generally have very little relationship with either anger or government illegitimacy, although older individuals are less likely to express anger, and older and more educated individuals are less likely to perceive the government as illegitimate.

Importantly, conspiracy beliefs are positively associated with both anger (β =.30, [LLCI =.25; UCI =.36]) and government illegitimacy (β =.35, [LLCI =.31; UCI =.39]), even after controlling for other variables in the models. That is, the more strongly participants believe in conspiracy theories, the angrier they are with government, and the more likely they are to perceive the government as illegitimate. Procedural justice, on the other hand, is negatively associated with both anger (β = −.44, [LLCI = −.51; UCI = −.37]) and government illegitimacy (β = −.40, [LLCI = −.46; UCI = −.35]). Those who perceive the government as more procedurally just are less likely to express anger or perceive the government as illegitimate. These latter findings suggest that procedural justice from governments can mitigate anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy. But can it do so even for those who believe strongly in conspiracy theories?

To answer this question, simple effects for procedural justice on each of the two outcome variables (i.e., anger and illegitimacy) were calculated and plotted at both low (−1SD) and high (+1SD) levels of conspiracy belief (see Figure 6). With respect to *anger*, Figure 6a suggests that procedural justice is negatively associated with anger for those who score *both* low (−1SD) (b = −.52 (se =.04), 95 percent LLCI = −.59, ULCI = −.45) and high (+1SD) (b = −.37, se =.05, [95 percentLLCI = −.47, ULCI = −.27]) on conspiracy beliefs; the association is slightly stronger for conspiracy *non*-believers. Figure 6b shows the simple effects for *government illegitimacy*. Like for anger, the results reveal that procedural justice is negatively associated with government illegitimacy for those who score *both* low (−1SD) (b = −.35, se =.03, [95 percentLLCI = −.40, ULCI = −.30]) and high (+1SD) (b = −.45, se =.04, [95 percentLLCI =

−.53, ULCI = −.39]) on conspiracy beliefs. Unlike for anger, however, this relationship is strongest for conspiracy believers. In other words, procedural justice is associated with lower anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy for both conspiracy believers and non-believers.

Discussion

Summary of findings

Our study aimed to better understand the association between conspiracy beliefs and violent anti-government extremism. Our findings suggest that conspiracy beliefs are positively associated with anti-government violence, and this is remarkably consistent across the three types of violence we measured (support for violent insurrection, violent intentions toward government, and self-reported violent behaviour against government targets). This finding supports Hypothesis 1. Importantly, we found the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and violence was partially mediated by anger *and* perceptions of government illegitimacy (supporting Hypothesis 2), with government illegitimacy emerging as the more influential mediator of the two. Again, this finding was consistent across the three violence types we measured. Finally, we found that governmental procedural justice mitigated both anger and government illegitimacy perceptions and did so effectively in both conspiracy believers and non-believers (support for Hypothesis 3).

Interpretation of findings, and implications for theory and policy

Our results support the theoretical proposition that conspiracy beliefs are associated with increased anger, perceptions of government illegitimacy, and support for violent anti-government extremism. Our findings also support the theoretical assertion that both anger and government illegitimacy mediate the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and anti-government violence. Finally, they also support the theoretical suggestion that procedural justice should be important to conspiracy believers and thus can help to mitigate their anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy (i.e., two drivers of violent extremism). With anger and perceived illegitimacy being associated with violence in our study, this latter finding is particularly important.

Past research has focused on psychological variables like anger, perceived threat and distrust as potential mediators explaining the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and anti-social outcomes, including violence.[69] Yet, the relevance of government (il)legitimacy as a potential driver of *conspiracy-fuelled violent extremism* has remained understudied. Additionally, while past research has hinted at legitimacy being an important driver of extremist violence,[70] conspiracy studies have not specifically measured and tested the statistical relevance of perceived government illegitimacy in this relationship. As such, our study provides empirical evidence that government illegitimacy is a critical mediator in the pathway from conspiracy belief to violence (although we qualify this by noting our data is cross-sectional in nature and thus the causal pathways are less clear with such data—see more on this below).

The fact that conspiracy beliefs are related to perceptions of government illegitimacy, suggests that conspiracy believers do not just distrust specific government actions or feel anger or threat in response to them. Rather, conspiracy believers can cognitively frame governments in a negative way and can come to actively view the entire government system as illegitimate. Such perceptions are concerning because they can motivate and justify violent opposition of government authority.[71] Also important here is our finding that government illegitimacy is a stronger mediator than anger. This suggests that broader perceptions of governmental (il)legitimacy may be more central than anger when it comes to motivating anti-government violence specifically. This builds on the work of Gamson et al.,[72] Sprinzak[73] and Tyler,[74] and suggests that the grievances expressed by conspiracy believers are not only emotionally charged, but are also cognitively framed in ways that encourage a rejection of government authority. Such a finding gives some hope, however, that governments can address

conspiracy beliefs *indirectly*, by improving perceptions (and the reality) of government as being fair, transparent, and respectful.

Indeed, our results support this assertion by showing that governmental procedural justice is associated with lower anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy in both conspiracy believers and non-believers. This finding builds on Murphy's[75] and van Prooijen and de Vries'[76] prior research, and demonstrates that procedural justice might help to actively reshape the emotional responses (i.e., anger) and cognitive framing (i.e., perceived illegitimacy) that drive extremist beliefs and behaviours. The findings also support van Prooijen's[77] assertion that conspiracy believers should be especially sensitive to procedural justice from authorities. That procedural justice was associated with reduced anger and perceptions of illegitimacy, even in conspiracy believers, provides further validation for this claim. It highlights the crucial role that perceptions of justice play in maintaining political stability.

Of course, people living in liberal democracies are free to think what they want (e.g., believe in conspiracies). But if these beliefs detrimentally affect society and spill over into violence then it is important that governments find ways to mitigate this risk. Given the self-sealing quality of conspiracy beliefs—where direct confrontation with facts can reinforce rather than challenge conspiracy beliefs[78]—we argue that policy strategies should shy away from directly debunking and deriding problematic beliefs. This risks further isolating individuals who may already perceive governments as part of the problem, causing them to double down on their beliefs,[79] and at worst mobilise people to violence. Instead, governments should actively encourage conspiracy believers to abstain from violence, and our findings suggest that interventions should also aim to address the underlying psychological mechanisms (anger, illegitimacy) that might mobilise violent beliefs and action among conspiracy believers. We argue that authorities should thus focus on reducing anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy that accompany conspiracy beliefs, rather than challenging the conspiracy beliefs directly. Governments might do this effectively by committing to procedurally just governance.

Specifically, governments might focus on increasing transparency, fairness, and independent, unbiased decision-making—especially during times of crisis and ongoing uncertainty. For example, making evidence-based decisions and clearly explaining reasons behind decisions is critical. This may entail sharing data or advising the public that expert advice has been taken to underpin government decisions and demonstrates that choices are not arbitrary or politically motivated. Other strategies might involve governments facilitating regular and more open forums for individuals to voice grievances and engage directly in dialogue with politicians. This might include holding town halls or online forums for public feedback, even if decisions need to be made quickly. Governments should also instigate consultation with civil society organisations, religious leaders, and neighbourhood representatives to reflect diverse perspectives. This may help to restore perceptions of legitimacy through participatory governance. Additional strategies could include establishing and strengthening independent oversight bodies or enacting reforms that promote greater fairness in decision-making. For example, introducing mechanisms for appeal and review of decisions when citizens challenge or question government decisions can embed accountability measures into government decision-making. Importantly, publicly admitting when errors occur and explaining corrective actions that have or will be taken should promote confidence that certain strategies can be rectified if found to be ineffective or unjust.

Consistency, neutrality and communication are also important. Ensuring that laws and regulations are always enforced fairly across different groups and avoiding favouritism and discrimination in governance is critical. Further, keeping rules and processes consistent will help people understand expectations and plan accordingly. Finally, training frontline staff (who serve as the government's representatives; e.g., police; social security officers; immigration officials, etc.) to treat people respectfully, even when enforcing difficult regulations/laws, is crucial for procedural justice to be demonstrated.

Such transparency, accountability and procedural fairness in political decisions, especially regarding controversial issues (e.g., economic, health, immigration, and welfare policy) can go a long way to potentially reducing anger and promoting government legitimacy. This may in turn help reduce the

likelihood of citizens turning to violence to address their grievances. Governments must consistently adhere to principles of procedural justice, however, as research shows that even one procedurally unjust experience can damage public trust and perceptions of an authority's legitimacy.[80] Given that Australia is a liberal democracy and shares many of the same values and similar democratic systems of government used in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Europe it would be reasonable to expect that the above-mentioned strategies might also work in other similar countries, although this would have to be tested empirically.

Of course, while we have put forward the virtues that procedurally just governance can offer, it is important to acknowledge that the effectiveness of procedural justice may have its limits when used with extremely disenfranchised individuals (e.g., conspiracy believers). For such people, procedurally just governance may be less effective or insufficient if the approach taken by government does not address deeper issues underpinning the grievances people have, such as perceived inequality or marginalisation that they feel. Such individuals may see attempts at procedural justice as symbolic or performative rather than genuinely inclusive or impactful. For example, a fair consultation process during a crisis may be met with scepticism if an individual or their community has never seen their input influence real outcomes before. Further, individuals living in extreme poverty or systemic neglect might prioritise immediate, tangible needs—like housing, food, or safety—over abstract principles of procedural fairness. If procedural justice does not translate into real, material change for them, it may seem irrelevant or even manipulative. While existing research, including the current study, suggests that procedural justice can be effective even when used with conspiracy believers and other disenfranchised individuals who question the legitimacy of authorities and their laws,[81] these inherent limits to procedural justice cannot be ignored. Only time and further research will clarify whether procedurally just governance proves helpful in overcoming entrenched conspiracy beliefs.

Limitations, future directions and conclusion

Before concluding we must acknowledge the limitations of our study. We acknowledge that it relied on a self-report measure of violent support, intentions and behaviour. Also, self-reported forms of violent extremism were low across the sample. Measures of violent support, intention and behaviour can also be prone to social desirability bias and underreporting. Relatedly, the internal validity of our violent behaviour scale was somewhat low (α =.57), questioning the reliability of our specific measure. Some of the items within the scale could also be questioned as not reflecting ideologically-motivated or anti-government-specific violence. Hence, our finding related to this measure should be interpreted with caution, particularly against the more reliable attitudinal measure findings. It is possible our finding relating to the behavioural measure may not be replicated when using another sample or in another jurisdiction.

Second, we drew our sample of survey respondents from Facebook. Our sample was skewed to older, predominantly white, and right-leaning Australian-born respondents. While this recruitment method enabled us to capture a sufficient number of conspiracy believers, our findings may not reflect how a representative sample of Australians would think or act.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of our survey data prevents us from making causal inferences between our tested variables. We suggested that conspiracy beliefs preceded violence, and this relationship was mediated by anger and perceptions of government illegitimacy. It is certainly possible that people who support violence or have engaged in violence use conspiracy theories to justify their views and behaviours after the event. Relatedly, our 'violent behaviour' measure was a retrospective indicator of participants' past behaviour. Hence, any causal relationships implied should be interpreted with caution. Finally, our study focused on a specific national context (Australia), and the findings may not generalise to other cultural or political environments.

To overcome these limitations, future research should develop a more robust measure of anti-government violent behaviour and recruit a representative sample from the general population to examine if our findings can be replicated. Future research might also employ longitudinal designs or

experiments to better understand the directionality of our hypothesised relationships and utilise different measures of violent behaviour that occur after the intervention or initial survey. Studies might explore the role of conspiracy beliefs in driving political violence in diverse international contexts to determine whether the relationships identified in our study hold across different cultures or political systems. Future studies that investigate whether real-world procedural justice interventions can effectively reduce violent political behaviour by reducing anger and perceived government illegitimacy may also prove useful. Finally, while this study examined the mediating influence of anger and perceived government illegitimacy, it would be useful to examine alternative psychological mechanisms that link conspiracy beliefs with violent extremism. This might include the role that moral disengagement, personal strain, perceptions of threat, or social identity play in the conspiracy belief/violence relationship.

To conclude, our study has highlighted the importance of anger and government illegitimacy as potential drivers of conspiracy-fuelled violent anti-government extremism. Of particular note is that government illegitimacy, not anger, was the more important mediator linking conspiracy beliefs with anti-government violence. The consistency of this finding across the three violence types studied suggests that the psychological mechanisms potentially linking conspiracy beliefs to violent anti-government extremism are remarkably consistent across different forms of anti-government violence. Our findings suggest that policymakers should prioritise strategies that promote government legitimacy and reduce anger if they wish to mitigate the risk of political and anti-government forms of violence in conspiracy believers. Our study specifically emphasised the role that governmental procedural justice plays in mitigating anger and perceived government illegitimacy in both conspiracy non-believers and believers. Hence, a genuine commitment by governments to consistently govern in a procedurally just way may be important to prevent and respond to the threat posed by conspiracy-fuelled extremism.

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Data availability statement

The data and analysis on which this paper is based are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Given the data has just been collected as part of an active grant the data are not yet publicly available.

Ethical approval

The research received ethics approval from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GUHREC: 2024/248).

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Appendix

Survey measures

Note: (R) denotes item was reverse coded before analysis

Conspiracy beliefs

How much do you agree with the following statements? I think that …

- Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us
- Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret
- Most people do not recognise to what extend our life is being controlled by conspiracies that are concocted in secret
- There are secret organisations that greatly influence political decisions
- Government agencies closely monitor all citizens
- The one percent (1 percent) of the richest people control our government and the economy for their own benefit
- There is a "deep state" embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight
- There is a secretive and powerful elite with a globalist agenda which is conspiring to achieve an authoritarian one-world government which will replace sovereign nation states

Procedural justice

The following questions ask about your thoughts about the government in your State/Territory. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- The government treats people with dignity and respect
- The government explains their decisions to the people they deal with
- The government lets people have a say before they make decisions
- The government makes their decisions based upon facts not personal biases
- The government treats people fairly
- The government provides the same quality of service to all people, regardless of who they are

Government illegitimacy

Think about your feelings and behaviours towards your State/Territory government. How much do you agree with the following statements?

- It is our moral duty to support the decisions of government even if we disagree with them (R)
- I obey government instructions with good will (R)
- Overall, I am committed to doing the right thing by our government (R)
- I do not recognise the legitimacy of our government
- The government has no right to dictate my behaviour
- It is my right to do what I want when I want without government interference

Anti-government violence

All violence items were contained within the same section of the survey and were prefaced with the following statement:

Many people in society respond to unpopular Government decisions and policies by engaging in political protest and activism. This section asks you about your opinions about political protest and activism, what actions you think are acceptable, and what you yourself have done for a cause you are passionate about.

Support for violent insurrection

- True Australian patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country
- It may be necessary at some point soon for citizens to take up arms against the government

Violent intentions

- I would be prepared to use violence against other people to achieve something I consider very important

- I would use violence to defend a cause that is important to me
- It's sometimes necessary to use violence to fight against things that are very unjust
- Sometimes people have to resort to violence to defend their values, convictions, or beliefs

Violent behaviour

Have you ever done the following actions?

- Participated in political action that was illegal
- Damaged property (e.g. vandalism; graffiti; a police car, defaced a government building)
- Set something on fire
- Thrown objects at the police
- Used actual violence against someone